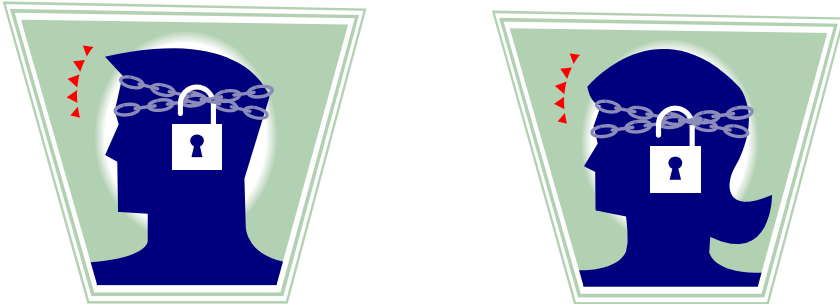


St George the Martyr
Shirley
Lent Course 2012



Can we build a better world?
(Learning from William Wilberforce)

Sunday 4 March: Friendship and Prayer
5 45p.m. For 6p.m. - 7p.m.

1. William Wilberforce would not have achieved what he achieved without friends working with him. His group of friends prayed together, worked together, shared their skills and their contacts, and of course encouraged each other when times were hard. You get a picture from the Bible of some rather lonely and isolated prophets, down to and including John the Baptist, and of Jesus himself being at times (crucial times) very much on his own: voices crying in the wilderness. However, Jesus had a team and called them friends, and he pays us the same compliment. We for our part, especially in the context of the local church are not going to achieve a great deal unless we share our particular enthusiasms with others, and pool our particular skills with those of others. **If we don't enable (make? create? nurture?) friendships in mission, we are going to be un-necessarily lonely....and un-necessarily weak in the face of difficulties and opposition.**

2. There is, of course, a downside to friendship - as every parent is at risk of **knowing as they see their children acquiring "unsuitable" friends, and making**

excuses for bad behaviour because Sally or Albert does it, or says it, or indeed **fails to do it**. **In today's teenage world, the peer group can be a more powerful driving force than the family**; and collectively people can be capable of bad behaviour that individually they would never dare to undertake. Many years **ago, the church young people's group was quite cohesive** - a group of friends; and the youth leader at the time commented to the mother of one of the members that the young lady might make her own mistakes but she would never **make other people's mistakes**. **While part of the group, she never stopped being her own person.**

3. What role has friendship played in your Christian journey? What Bible friendships come to mind? Does Christianity/church membership tend to cut across friendships, or to strengthen them; or is it just irrelevant to them? In some faith groups, young people are actively discouraged from forming friendships outside the faith group: which can make people feel and be rather isolated if they can no longer sign up to the tenets of that faith group. Some people see themselves as having lots of acquaintances, but no friends; and certainly **Face Book Friends don't necessarily amount to friends in the traditional sense**. How do we define a friend; and would you agree that believer and non-believer **can't really be friends**?

4. Laying down your life for a friend is asking a lot. Christian teaching seems to **require willingness to lay down our lives for our "enemies"**.



5. Wilberforce and his friends prayed together, and expected results from prayer - though not quick results. The abolition of first the slave trade and then of slavery too many years of campaigning; and we are painfully aware that

discrimination lasted far beyond the formal abolition of slavery.... quite apart from the fact that there is still slavery in the 21st Century. When, to quote Francis Drake, we undertake any great work, do we pray about it, and, if we do, do we pray in the expectation of results or just because it is something we feel we ought to do? Do we base our choices on prayer, or make our choices and then expect God to see things our way and lend us his support? There has been controversy recently about prayer being said in Parliament and in Local Council meetings. The critics have objected to time being spent on meaningless talk to a non-existent God; but they have also argued that prayer is divisive because it separates people who should be there with a common purpose into believers and non-believers. What do you think?

6. On the whole, Christians (assuming they expect an answer from God) can **live with the “not yet” answer, but have difficulty with the “no” answer.** **The Archbishop of York’s sister was butchered despite the intense prayers of her family for her safety;** and even if in some sense death and other suffering produces unexpected good, it is hard to say thank you for what you most wanted not to happen. Can we draw comfort (and meaning?) from Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for a way out of what happened on Golgotha on Good Friday?

7. **If we think about prayer as a partnership with God in God’s project, with God as very much the senior partner - rather than as giving God our wish list - we might be less upset when we got “the wrong” or “no” answer.** However, that looks suspiciously like saying that actually prayer makes no difference, because God is going to do, or not do, whatever we say?

8. Friendship is intimately connected with prayer. St Theresa of Avila speaks of prayer as being on terms of friendship with God: part of a loving relationship with him who loves us. Maybe that gives yet another perspective on the **familiar issue of why God doesn’t always say yes, and why, even in relation to the best of good causes, he often seems to take a long time to say anything.** Our starting point is that God loves us, which must mean that he never ignores **our prayers, and certainly doesn’t set out to be as awkward as possible in response to our earnest petitions.** Maybe looking at things in this way also argues for prayer being much more a part of the warp and weft of our daily lives than it often is.



Southwark Mission Prayer
God of faith, deepen our faith
so we may bear witness to Christ in the world;
God of hope, strengthen our hope
so we may be signposts to your transforming presence;
God of love, kindle our love
so that , in a fragile and divided world,
we may be signs of the faith, hope and love
which we share in Jesus Christ.
Amen.